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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
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including the right to development

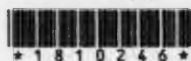
Written statement* submitted by the World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Ukraine: Freedoms Under Fire

The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations wishes to focus the attention of the international community on the deterioration of human rights continuing in Ukraine, particularly on the dramatic constraints on freedoms of expression and access to information that have been imposed by the Russian Federation after its occupation and illegal annexation of Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

Since the onset of Russian interventions in Crimea and Ukraine's Donbas, Ukraine has become one of the world's most dangerous environments for civil society activists and journalists. Over the last four years, a large number of journalists have been kidnapped, held in prolonged, arbitrary and incommunicado detention, subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, even to the death, both in Crimea and in the separatist-controlled areas of the Donbas.

Journalists who attempt to report on the self-proclaimed Republics in Ukraine's eastern territory face serious challenges. According to the Ukrainian NGO Telekritika, the lives of those reporting on the armed conflict are under serious threat. Ukrainian media outlets do not prioritize the security of their reporters, even when they are working in conflict zones. The Committee to Protect Journalists says that at least five journalists and two media workers have been killed in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Approximately 3200 people have been captured since the beginning of the conflict in Donbas by the authorities of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk (DNR) and People's Republic of Luhansk (LNR), with 117 remaining in imprisonment in February 2017.

According to the European Parliament's Resolution adopted in March 2017, at least 62 Ukrainian citizens had been illegally prosecuted for political reasons by the Russian law enforcement agencies, 49 of them residents of Crimea. At least 17 citizens of Ukraine were still being illegally detained in the Russian Federation and 15 in occupied Crimea. At least a hundred Ukrainians were being kept hostages in appalling conditions in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Systemic violations of the right to freedom of expression continue to occur in Crimea and the Donbas, where access to Ukrainian and independent media has been blocked and any criticism of the *de facto* Russian authorities is not tolerated. The situation with the right to freedom of expression in the DNR and LNR remains particularly difficult. Human rights groups such as Reporters without Borders and Freedom House have denounced the absence of investigative journalists and foreign observers in the territories and the censorship of the media by the *de facto* authorities. Since 2014 scores of Ukrainian media outlets have been closed or had to relocate from the separatist-controlled area. Due to lack of access to the DNR and LNR territories, human rights organizations have not been in a position to document all cases of human rights violations. The Institute of Mass Information documented 12 violations of freedom of speech in 2016 and 17 violations in 2015. These included blockage of Ukrainian and international media, censorship, and cases of harassment, both physical and psychological attacks against journalists and bloggers.

The DNR and LNR have been cut off from Ukrainian media and other information sources. More than 100 Ukrainian online media have been blocked and access to all Ukrainian TV channels has been closed. Only local pro-governmental channels as well as Russian channels are available. Based on a survey conducted by GfK Ukraine and the Institute of Mass Information, 91% of people in DNR and LNR regularly watch television but broadcasting is limited to only Russian and separatist-controlled channels. Meanwhile, people living on the Ukrainian government-controlled territory of Donbas watch mostly Ukrainian television (88%) and only 16% of them choose Russian channels. The Ukrainian experts who conducted the survey noted the potentially deleterious effects of active propaganda and information isolation on the people living in those communities within the separatist controlled territories.

Ukraine is facing grave challenges. In addition to the need to protect civilian lives and the journalists reporting on the war, the Ukrainian government and civil society organizations have been engaged in confronting Russian propaganda aimed at swaying the minds of Ukrainians at home and abroad, as well as the wider international community. In 2014, the Stopfake.org collaborative platform created by students and lecturers from Journalism Department of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy started its work of identifying false information about the events in Ukraine. The Stopfake initiative has raised media literacy, created a propaganda archives and trained various stakeholders, earning appreciative recognition of the public.

It is clear that the Russian Federation has been using all available mechanisms and tools to spread its propaganda worldwide in an attempt to hinder Ukrainian initiatives for freedom and democracy. In contrast, the Russian Federation has shown no effort to address its systematic violations of human rights, despite numerous appeals for this action by the Human Rights Council and other international bodies and agencies.

The deterioration of human rights in Crimea and in Ukraine's eastern regions must urgently be addressed. The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations calls for justice through a thorough investigation of the imprisonment of bloggers, journalists and publishers of media. Serious steps must be taken to increase awareness of how misinformation is circulating in the national and international media, as well as through academic and public institutions. We urge action to put pressure on the Russian Federation to open up access to Crimea and to put an end to the existing impunity for human rights abuses. We also urge for pressure on the Russian Federation to release Ukrainian civil society activists, in particular Ukrainian filmmaker and writer, Oleh Sentsov, held for expressing disagreement with the RF's annexation of Crimea, who has recently started a hunger strike.

The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations calls on the international community to support the Ukrainian government, media and human rights organizations in their efforts to restore freedoms of information in Crimea and the Donbas, and to secure the safety of journalists, political dissenters and human rights defenders, in keeping with international standards.
